

Servius on Divine Identity and Difference¹

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When it comes to the Greco-Roman gods, there is a certain interpretive problem that is so awkward, scholars either avoid it completely or generalize with so much dogmatism that one gets the impression they simply want to will it out of existence. The problem, to put a name on it, is that of “identification” (though we will see that this word is already misleading). Ancient pagan writers continually tell us that this god and that god are the same, or that what is thought to be one god are in reality several, and so on, but they do it so casually and so inconsistently that one despairs of an explanation. What is worse is how unbothered the ancients were at this – to use a phrase of Aristotle’s, they “considered only what was convincing to themselves, and gave no consideration to us.” (Metaphysics 1000a, tr. Tredennick)

Since the issue was, from our perspective, so undertheorized, this means that any ancient author who does deign to theorize on it has to be taken with a grain of salt. On the other hand, there are also authors like Maurus Servius Honoratus. Servius was a grammarian, not a philosopher, who was not looking to build his own philosophical system but only to make passages in Vergil’s poetry comprehensible. So he is in something of a middle position between just telling us something that we don’t understand (“God A is god B, god B is god C, but god A isn’t god C”) and giving us an elaborate but entirely idiosyncratic explanation.

Before I get to Servius, however, I want to address some of the ways that “identification” is framed by modern scholars. The most important term is no doubt *Interpretatio Romana* – whose many demerits call for a separate discussion; but in brief, *interpretatio* means nothing more or less than ‘translation’. Another one, which has not seen much use after the 19th century, is **Syncretism**, ‘commixture’. This refers to a ‘blending’ of gods, like that of Helios and Apollon, or Lucan’s *numen mixtum*, ‘mixed deity’:

*Mons Phoebo Bromioque sacer cui numine mixto
Delphica Thebae referunt trieterica Bacchae.* (Civil War 5.72f)

The mountain sacred to Phoebus (Apollo) and Bromius,¹ to whose mingled deity
The Theban Bacchants lead up the Delphic *Trieteric* festival (procession).

1. Liber/Dionysos.

But here scholars always seem to take it that from the moment of blending, the gods are no longer distinguished, when it is Lucan’s point that the merging of Apollo and Liber is specific to a place and time (Delphi, every two years).

The famous confounding of Apollo and the Sun in late antiquity is also a rather more complex phenomenon than is usually acknowledged. Up to the very end of antiquity, pagan writers remain fully conscious of the difference between them in terms of mythology and iconography (different parents, children, place and time of birth, different attributes). And even those authors who claim that they are fully one and the same being seem to preserve a rough conceptual distinction between Apollo, the god of prophecy, and Helios, the celestial body and all-seeing guarantor of oaths. It is only with the mythographer Fulgentius, a North African Christian of the 6th century, that we see a literatus succumbing to real confusion.

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In the 20th century and into the current one, the word **Syncretism** has been very popular, but it covers too many different phenomena to be very insightful. It refers not only to (a) the combination and assimilation of beliefs and practices from two different cultures, and to (b) the “identification” of gods in the process of such an assimilation, but can also mean (c) the equation of two gods within one cultural system. While Syncrasis covered (b) and (c) without distinction, Syncretism seems to hover between (a+b) and (b+c), to the detriment of most scholarly arguments that employ it.

Now try to put these three terms out of your mind for the moment, and let us look at some passages from Servius. The first is from his commentary on Vergil’s earliest work, the *Eclogues*. The first paragraph is not directly pertinent to our question, but is a prerequisite to understanding the second:

Lo, four altars (*aras*), two for you, Daphnis, and two altars (*altaria*) for Phoebus (*Eclogue* 5.66): “I have made,” he says, “four altars (*aras*); to you, o Daphnis, I give two, and to Apollo two altars (*aras*) which are *altaria*.” For we know that *arae* are consecrated for both the gods above (*diis superis*), and for those below (*inferis*)¹, while *altaria* only belong to the gods above (*supernorum deorum*); it is certain that their name derives from ‘altitude’. Now these he gives to Apollo, as a god. But for Daphnis he sets up *arae*. For he legitimately called him a god, yet it is manifest that he used to be a mortal.

Reasonably, the question is put why he says that he will set up two *altaria* to Apollo, when it is certain that the gods above (*supernos deos*) take delight in an odd number, but those below (*infernos*) in an even one, as “a god takes delight in odd number”, which the pontifical books also indicate. But it is certain, if we follow Porphyry’s book, which he called the Sun², that the power (*potestatem*) of Apollo is threefold, and that he is the Sun/Sol among those above (*superos*), Liber Pater on earth, and Apollo among those below (*inferos*). Because of this, we see three tokens (*insignia*) around his image (*simulacrum*): a lyre, which shows us an image of the celestial harmony; a gryphon, which demonstrates that he is also an earthly *numen*; arrows, by which he indicates the infernal (*infernus*) and noxious god. It is also for this reason that Apollo is named from ‘destroying’ (gr. *apo tou apollyein*). Hence it is also that Homer says that he effects pestilence as much as health [...]. Therefore Vergil, acquainted with this reasoning, shows the supernal (*supernum*) *numen* through the *altaria*, and indicates the infernal power (*infernam potestatem*) through the even number.

¹ ‘Those above’ are the celestial gods, ‘those below’ are the gods of the underworld, including the dead.

² In the 20th century, an alleged treatise *On the Sun (Peri Heliou)* was identified as the basis for two (very dissimilar) works praising the Sun’s many *numina* or powers, Julian’s prose hymn *To King Helios*, and the Speech of Praetextatus in Macrobius’ *Saturnalia*. But in fact, 1. Servius refers to a book called *Sun*, which makes for a very improbable Greek book title (*Helios* rather than *Peri Heliou*), 2. what Servius tells us here shows no real relation to what is in Julian or Macrobius, 3. instead, it resembles what is found in other Latin scholiasts. However the name Porphyry found its way into the scholium, I do not think that in the form we have it, it tells us anything about Porphyry’s teachings. Similarly, in Servius *On Aeneid* 9.182, Porphyry’s teacher Plotinus is name-dropped but no Plotinian doctrines follow.

We read here that Apollo has three powers, also called *numina*, Sol, Liber and Apollo. But Apollo is superordinated only because the digression is prompted by a discussion of Apollo. In a different context, Liber becomes a power of Sol:

Sol (*Aeneid* 4.607): [...] and quite appropriately does he invoke Sol, to whom he has sacrificed before through the *numen* of Liber.

In yet another place, he simply coordinates the three:

the seer raves like a Bacchus (Aeneid 6.78): and quite appropriately does she [the Sibyl, who is touched or inspired by Apollo] “rave like a Bacchus (*bacchatur*)”. For Apollo is the same as Liber Pater and as Sol, which is why Lucan says: “to whose mingled *numen* [...]”: for this reason there was a coming-together of *Phoebades*¹ and Bacchantes at their rites (*sacris*).

¹ Female devotees of Phoebus Apollo.

In a fourth passage, he actually seems to place all three powers in the underworld:

Prostrate (“... we fall to the earth” as Apollo’s voice is heard; Aeneid 3.93): ‘bent down’. In body or in soul? Or because we kneel in entreaty? Or, in fact (*quod verum est*), bent down? One must also know that, when people pray, they sometime turn their gaze downward (*ima*), sometimes upward (*summa*), according to the property of the numina (*pro qualitate numinum*), since some powers are celestial, others earthly, others mixed. For this reason they now “fall to the earth” in intercessionary prayer (*deprecantes*) to Apollo. For he is the same as Sol, and Liber Pater, who travelled to those below (*inferos*), as Horace [says about Liber]: “Cerberus saw you and was harmless” (*Odes* 2.19.29). And therefore they quite appropriately “fall to the earth,” from whence responses come to them, and because Apollo is also known to those below (*inferis*).

It is instructive to see how the same basic ideas, firstly that three named gods are “one and the same”, secondly that a god has multiple powers or *numina*, are reconfigured as their explanatory power is needed. The vagueness of “power” and *numen* is also productive, since both can suggest either an entity or a sort of state or activity. When Servius says that “some powers are celestial”, for example, he is using power as a synonym for “god” (*deus*), as a near-parallel in the commentary on 8.275 shows: “For there are certain *numina* that are only celestial, others only terrestrial, others intermediary.” On the other hand, a *numen*, which here and in ordinary language means a god, is also used in a very different sense by Servius:

a numen injured in what place (quo)? / which (quo) injured numen? (Aeneid 1.8): ‘quo: where (*in quo*), on which occasion. And this is the seventh [=locative] case and a common expression; since we say ‘where (*quo*) did I injure you?’

There is also another interpretation; since Juno [=the injured/offended deity in question] has many *numina*; there is Curitis, who uses a chariot (*curru*) and a spear¹, as in: “here are her arms, here was her chariot” (Aeneid 1.16); there is Lucina, who has charge over those giving birth, as “Juno Lucina, bring wealth!” (Terence, *Andria* 3.1.15); there is the Queen (*regina*), as “I who stride as Queen of the gods (*divum*)” (Aeneid 1.46); and there are other *numina* of hers. Therefore rightly he is in doubt about which *numen* of hers Aeneas has injured.

However, others say that it is to be distinguished [from Juno], since he is not in doubt about the hatred of Juno, but asks which other *numen* is injured.

¹ Spear here = *hasta*, but *curis* in the Sabine dialect, see Ovid, *Fasti* 2.477

Are these *numina* forms, hypostases, aspects, emanations of Juno, to rehearse some of the usual vocabulary? Really, all these words are inappropriate. An emanation, in the Neoplatonic sense, is distinct from that which produces it, and is unambiguously inferior – but is Juno the Queen of Gods a subordinate of Juno herself? Aspects, on the other hand, have no independent nature at all, since they lie in the eyes of the beholder. Yet how could one offend an appearance or

impression of Juno, or even a facet of hers? Hypostasis has a very different meaning in ancient philosophy, and applying it to pagan gods in this way imports irrelevant concerns from Christian theology, where it was adopted to theorize how three persons (*prosopa* or *hypostases*) can be one being, one god. Finally, form is at once terribly vague and overdetermined; it certainly doesn't capture the specific array of meanings that *numen* has: a specific god, a divine being of uncertain identity, a specific god's divine power, their will, decision, or sway. A form is always the form of something. But a *numen* can be the power of a god, or it can *have* powers (who can again be gods!). This shouldn't be taken as a sign of confusion or circularity, but of openness; rather than a definite hierarchy between gods, the same *numina* can stand in multiple relations to each other, because they are fundamentally on the same discursive plane.

"Identification" does not primarily serve to reduce plurality or complexity, but to structure and organize it; and not to organize it in a comprehensive system either, but according to the momentary needs (of worship, of a philosophical system, of a line of poetry). As a matter of fact, it is productive of plurality and complexity, creating twofold, threefold, manifold *numina*.

Accordingly, we are not talking about the creation of new beliefs – let alone new religions – but about strategies of stabilizing a wide field of inherited ideas by making them reinforce each other. For example, the "identification" of Hecate, Luna, Diana and Proserpine does not make them identical at all, that is, it does not reduce them to one figure. It becomes part of the imaginary associated with each of the deities that they are each other, but they remain conceivable as separate, in fact they become increasingly intelligible precisely through their identity-and-difference:

Hecate placed [you] in command over the Avernian groves (*Aeneid* 6.118): Hecate is a *numen* of three powers (*potestatum*), for Luna, Diana and Proserpine are the same. But he could not name Proserpine alone (here), on account of the groves—which belong to Diana—, (nor) again Diana, because he says Avernian [=infernal, Diana not being of the underworld]; whence he has chosen a name with which both agreed (*in quo utrumque constabat*). Whence Lucan says about Proserpine: "Hecate, our last part" (*Civil War* 6.700).

In light of the evidence in Servius, I propose that we think of the pagan gods not as being slotted into a rigid cosmological hierarchy, with each person or group having one such cosmological scheme ("a religion"). Especially outside of formalized contexts like mythological poetry and elaborated philosophies, many different hierarchies and non-hierarchical orders emerge in writing, thinking and enactment, as people bring the associations of different *numina* into relation with each other and with their other concerns and ideas. The relation of "A is B" should not be taken as more fundamental than that of "A is married to B", or "A is worshipped together with B". We should take the gods as something like pieces of vocabulary, each with their specific semantics of usage, and Greco-Roman paganism as a language, or a dialect continuum, never as a fixed text.